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All too often we separate political prisoners from the other people incarcerated alongside them. While it is necessary that we support those incarcerated for fighting back against the system, abolition means supporting all those locked up as we fight for a better world. Rattling the Cages creators Eric King and Josh Davidson talk with Hector "Bori" Rodriguez and Farhan Ahmed, both of whom spent decades imprisoned in New York where they became politicized as they fought for their freedom.

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RATTLING THE CAGES

ORAL HISTORIES OF NORTH AMERICAN POLITICAL PRISONERS

"Becoming Politicized In Prison"

HECTOR "BORI" RODRIGUEZ | FARHAN AHMED | ERIC KING | JOSH DAVIDSON

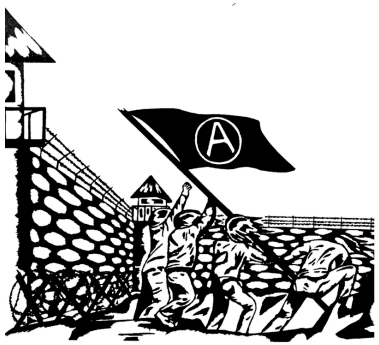
Originally hosted as a live conversation by Firestorm Books,
recording available on Firestorm's youtube channel:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtvtudBoMfk
December 7, 2024

Published by AK Press, *Rattling the Cages: Oral Histories of North American Political Prisoners* is a project of abolitionists Josh Davidson and Eric King. The book is filled with the experience and wisdom of over thirty current and former North American political prisoners. It provides first-hand details of prison life and the political commitments that continue to lead prisoners into direct confrontation with state authorities and institutions.

Transcription, editing, and formatting by ev, Danielle, Josh, & Jeremy with help from Firestorm Books.

all labor volunteered

with whatever weapons at hand



Rattling the Cages

1) Political Prisoners, Mass Incarceration, & Abolition
Eric King, Herman Bell, David Gilbert, Susan Rosenberg

2). Continuing the Struggle Inside & Out
Eric King, Ashanti Alston, Ray Luc Levasseur

3) Antifascism Behind Bars
Eric King and David Campbell

4) Black August & Prisoner Support
Eric King, dequi kioni-sadiki, Harold Taylor

5) Eric King in Conversation with James Kilgore
Eric King, James Kilgore

6) Post-Prison Activism & Archiving Resistance
Eric King, Jake Conroy, Claude Marks

7) Until All Are Free
Eric King, Jason Hammond, Jeremy Hammond

8) Revolutionary Women Behind Bars
Eric King, Linda Evans, Laura Whitehorn, Nicole Kissane

9) Becoming Politicized in Prison
Eric King, Josh Davidson, Hector Rodriguez, Farhan Ahmed

10) Rattling the Cages: How We Dit It & How You Can Too
Eric King, Sara Falconer, Josh Davidson

11) Abolition Is a Family Affair
Eric King, Sharon Shoatz, susie day, Rochell Bricker

12) Looking Back at the George Jackson Brigade
Mark Cook, Janine Bertram, Eric King

all conversations are available @FirestormCoop on youtube

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez is a resilient artist and advocate who spent 27 years incarcerated in New York for felony murder and drug possession, finding freedom when released in February 2023. While in prison, he transformed his trauma into purpose through the Bard Prison Initiative and Rehabilitation through the Arts, where he embraced critical thinking, writing, performance, and visual art. His work vividly reflects his journey, blending memories of childhood with the harsh realities of incarceration. Now a Yale Prison Education Initiative Fellow, he continues to develop his art while advocating for educational and creative programs in prison, believing in their transformative power. Follow him on Instagram* and buy some of Bori's art!*

Farhan Ahmed is a writer and advocate who spent 20 years incarcerated in New York state, including 18 months in an immigration detention center. During his time in prison, he transformed his emotional trauma into a sense of purpose. After earning his GED, he completed a Bachelor's degree in Social Studies through the Bard Prison Initiative, focusing on the impact of industrial agriculture on climate change. This program helped him develop skills such as critical thinking, academic and fiction writing, and art. Since his release in August 2024, Farhan has been planning to pursue a Master's in Public Health at Columbia University, a scholarship opportunity offered to him while he was still in prison. Currently, he is working on creating a community-based program that provides both physical and mental health support to populations displaced by climate change. Farhan is also passionate about involving younger generations in decision-making processes to address the ongoing social and ecological crises, believing that they are the leaders of tomorrow. Read some of Farhan's writings.*

**instagram.com/boricreates*
**shopboricreates.com/*
**socialchangenyu.com/people/farhan-ahmed/*

Eric King is a father, poet, author, and activist. In December 2023 he was released from the supermax ADX prison after spending nearly ten years as a political prisoner for an act of protest over the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. He was held in solitary confinement for years and was met with violence by guards throughout his incarceration. Eric has published three zines: *Battle Tested* (2015), *Antifa in Prison* (2019), and *Pacing in My Cell* (2019). His sentencing statement is included in the book *Defiance: Anarchist Statements Before Judge and Jury* (2019). Eric now works as a paralegal for the Bread and Roses Legal Center.

Josh Davidson is an abolitionist, a member of the *Certain Days: Freedom for Political Prisoners* calendar collective, and also part of the Children's Art Project with political prisoner Oso Blanco. Josh edited *Rattling the Cages: Oral Histories of North American Political Prisoners.* He works in communications with the Zinn Education Project, which promotes the teaching of radical people's history in classrooms and provides free lessons and resources for educators.

Support Political Prisoners

As you've heard & read, it is vital that we support the political prisoners of our liberation movements. Providing support builds bridges across and through prison bars, giving those locked inside a connection to the outside world. Your support matters.

Get involved. Write to a political prisoner—a simple letter provides a needed escape. Visit them in prison. Ask what a political prisoner needs and do what you can to help them. Offer them support.

Visit the NYC Anarchist Black Cross website (*nycabc.wordpress.com*) and learn more about those currently imprisoned for political reasons.

Buy a Certain Days: Freedom for Political Prisoners calendar (*certaindays.org*).

Visit your local Books Through Bars group and send books to those incarcerated (*booksthroughbarsnyc.org/resources*).

Join your nearest Anarchist Black Cross group (*abcf.net*).

Visit *rattlingthecages.com* to learn more.

Write to Political Prisoners

nycabc.wordpress.com

uprisingsupport.org

thejerichomovement.com

Libertie Valance: Welcome to everybody who is here. My name's Libertie, and I'm a member of the Firestorm Collective. Tonight we're excited to host Rattling the Cages editors Eric King and Josh Davidson in conversation with Bori and Farhan, two individuals who spent decades imprisoned in New York where they became politicized as they fought for their freedom.

This is actually our last virtual event of 2024, but I know both the Rattling the Cages series and Firestorm are continuing in the new year, so I encourage you to follow us on social media and also bookmark our calendar.

Ya'll, it's a huge pleasure to have you all here, and this is going to be a great conversation. I'm going ahead to pass it off to Eric. Here you go, friend.

Eric King: Hello! All right, here we go. Farhan, Bori, I am super, super excited to talk with you both. I feel really blessed that you agreed to join us. Thank you so much. To get started, there is often a stigma in the abolitionist community where they isolate or give more notice to political prisoners as opposed to social prisoners, as if there's a different class system. Can you please talk about why, what circumstances led you to prison for these most recent cases, and also where your politics were at when you were locked up? We can start with you, Farhan, and Bori, if you just want to jump in after.

Farhan Ahmed: First of all, thank you for this opportunity, Eric. It is a pleasure to talk to you and be here. I think, to answer your question, it's our social setting that allow us to perpetuate, to differentiate us, instead of trying to get us together in solidarity, right? If we, for example, commit a certain crime, then it will be categorized as a social issue or maybe as a political issue. I think from my perspective, if we can get together and find a commonality among us, it can help us to build more solidarity. As for me, it was a social issue when I got locked up. I became more aware at the beginning that my understanding of my political environment was very little. I did not even have a proper high school education. For me, it was a learning experience from the very beginning. I made sure I got my GED and got involved with other programs which were being provided by other men who were already doing time before me. So, that was my beginning stage to learn more about political understanding at the

beginning of my sentencing time. I will pass it to Hector.

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: Like Farhan, I thank you and Josh for having me here.

Eric King: Hell yeah.

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: I'll share a little bit of my story. What led me to prison was I was selling drugs. When I was selling drugs, one of my friends who also was selling drugs found himself in a complicated situation where the people he got the drugs from kidnapped him for a short period of time and threatened to take his life. At the moment while we was looking for him, we found a person that ran away with his drugs, and then we kidnapped that person, and I ended up taking that person's life. That was in '95. Governor Pataki was the governor in New York state. He tried to give me the death penalty or life without the possibility of parole. I went to trial. They found me guilty of lesser charges, but I still ended up with 28 years to life. Out of those 28 years to life, I did 27 years and 2 months.

I think since I was in my teens I was dabbing in and out of politics, but I like to say there was kind of a misguided politics. I grew up in Philadelphia from the age of 7 to 13, and so I lived in a very poor community. I was always proud of being Puerto Rican, but with that came not liking white people, who we believe put us in those circumstances. I said "dabbing in and out," because there were times that I would read something about the Macheteros or whatever, things like that that had to do with Puerto Rico, but I wasn't really engaged in it. In prison I think I became more aware of the prison industrial complex when I joined Bard College, because then we were engaging in material that spoke about different social issues. I had a professor, she said she was an abolitionist, and that was I think the first time that I heard that word. I questioned her about it, and then she broke it down to me. I started digging more into it and then understanding how the system was operating and how... For example, a lot of big companies like Pepsi, all these companies their products in commissary are still contributing to not only bringing diabetes to our poor communities and poor health but also in prison causing more harm with their products in there. On top of that, their products is very expensive.

I started becoming more aware of that and also like the mental health

art by Hector "Bori" Rodriguez

cosmetic solutions to the broken economic system, the only lasting solution rests in breaking down this global imperial empire.

Mutual aid communities promote a society based on reciprocity, caretaking infrastructure, and collective healing. The Red Nation, a group of Indigenous people in the United States, advocate for a collective healing from colonialism and capitalism. This philosophy rests on social equality of wealth, land, and a dignified human life, where mental and economic freedom remain paramount. The betterment of society and its fragile ecosystem will bring solidarity among other species as well. Global solidarity can lead to a revolution in achieving social and environmental justice.

We must eradicate imperialism and build a society based on cooperation and reciprocity. Yes, this fight is extremely difficult, but it is our responsibility to fight wisely and cause minimal destruction to humanity and nature. The best route for us is to take part in this struggle wherever we fit best, while practicing reciprocity and stewardship of nature. We are part of nature, not above it. Imperialism separates human family, and is at the root of our devastating betrayal of nature. We can only repair this relationship with each other by dismantling imperialism whenever it exists.

aspect of it. So, yeah, that's how, I think. I mean, I knew friends in prison who would talk to me, like "five percenters" and Muslims and things like that, who would talk to me about the system, but I think it was when I was in school that brought perspective to the chaos that I was trying to figure out.

Eric King: Will you tell people listening what a "five percenter" is?

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: A "five percenter," it's kind of a branch of the Nation of Islam. They call themselves gods. They believe they are the original people. They have their own norms. I would say that a lot of them it's like an off-branch of also like Muslims, you know. Today, they call them themselves the nation of gods and earth, I think. Something like that. Yeah, they have their own way of of talking, but they're very militant in reading and behavior and things like that.

Eric King: Thank you both. Right now, I'd really like to talk about what prison was like before your consciousness became politicized, before you started thinking about things in those terms. Farhan, I'm going to start with you. I would like to hear what was your days like? Who did you hang out with? What was your routine? Just things of that nature to help describe, like paint a picture of what your time was like.

Farhan Ahmed: For me, the first few years of prison, it was, I would say, more stressful for me. The reason was that I had just recently come to the United States, like three and a half years before I got locked up in the summer of 2005. For me, I was trying to, I guess, situate myself with my surroundings. It could be the built environment and also about the cultural understanding, because a lot of things were very new for me: what everybody's doing, how they are behaving, and how I should be responding or trying to confine myself in a certain structure so I would not stand out like someone who does not know what's going on or maybe getting into trouble. That was the initial circumstances for me. What I did, I was keeping myself close to elder men. They seem to be looking to help young men who were getting into too many problems. Obviously, when I noticed they were trying to mentor them, I felt that might be a lot easier for me to learn what are the cultural norms in a prison setting and how I can navigate accordingly.

A normal day at the beginning: I was looking for a job. I remember I

started off working in a mess hall at Sing Sing, and there were a couple of elder men who—one was actually from Pakistan, the other was a Muslim from New Jersey—and they got to like me, and they will walk me through like, "Okay, do not get involved with drugs. Do not gamble. Do not do those things which are going to basically consume you in a prison kind of lifestyle which will be full of troubles and constantly getting into fights." That was a normal routine around that time. Lucky for me, within a few months I ended up getting transferred out of Sing Sing. I went to Five Point, where I started school. That setting really gave me a little bit more room to breathe. I felt if I can keep myself in an educational setting most of the time, I will be learning and at the same time I will be staying away from any kind of trouble which may be easy to get involved with. That was the initial thing, to make sure I'm learning what is going on around me, and how I can remove myself from there without getting into trouble. Sanctuary for me was being in an educational setting. It could be school. It could be vocational programs. That's where I was spending most of my time in the beginning of my bid.

Eric King: I don't want to make assumptions. Are you, were you a practicing Muslim inside prison?

Farhan Ahmed: Yes, I was. I was at the beginning, like trying to understand what's going on, because in a prison environment, as you know, each religion has so many sects. When I was in prison, you had many different sects, but a lot of them, they will understand where everybody is, and they will be looking for a more common thing, how we can relate with each other and learn and help each other. I was practicing Islam when I was in prison. I will look forward to the month of Ramadan, which is a fasting month, because that will bring me close to other brothers, and it will be a way of being in a prison setting throughout the day, but they will allow us to be together for a larger amount of time during the day and evening. Those kind of different activities really help me to stay focused and don't get involved with negativity.

Eric King: Okay, awesome. Thank you. Yeah, Bori, just in case you don't remember the question, it is: What was your routine like? What was your life like? Who were you hanging out with? What were you doing? How was your time occupied when you were first inside before you became more politicized?

Exiting Imperialism: The Root of the Current Social Crises

by Farhan Ahmed

published in *The Certain Days: Freedom for Political Prisoners Calendar*, 2024

Imperialism persists. Imperialist nations, as they have done for centuries, continue to extract resources and exploit human labor from other nations. In the years after WWII colonies gained independence, but they remain under the clutches of imperial nations via economic imperialism. Aboriginal, Indigenous, non-Indigenous, and other oppressed people on a global scale recognize the imperial history of chameleon exploitations and demand for wealth wealth distribution.

After acknowledging the sovereignty of former colonies, imperialist nations began to colonize developing nations via economic imperialism. With the promotion of the free market, big corporations deepened their capitalistic reach in other sectors. Consider agricultural biotechnology: the colonizers applied scientific methods to solve the pressing concern in feeding the growing population. Biotech corporations introduced genetically modified seeds for higher yields and monopolized the agricultural market, from seeds to fertilizers to expensive machinery. Gradually, corporations such as Monsanto, Dupont, and ConAgra turned the seeds of staple crops, fruits, and vegetables into commodities via intellectual property rights.

However, local farmers could not afford expensive seeds, machinery, and pesticides. As the promotion of commercial agriculture increased wealth for the global elite, it systematically displaced farmers and farm workers who could not find jobs in other sectors, causing widespread, endemic intergenerational poverty. The repeated cycles of economic imperialism leave behind carnage of social devastation throughout the world. Imperialism and capitalism are causing social and environmental devastation.

In stark contrast to industrialized agriculture, Indigenous farming works with nature. Yet, scientific knowledge controlled by capitalism portrays technological solutions as a silver bullet, undermining our essential relationship with nature. Subsequently, threats to world peace stem from the inaction of those who practice and support imperialism. Instead of

strengthen the bonds between all of us to overcome the state's regime of isolation, to study and learn together, and to build a world without prisons. They want this to work like a kind of forum, a tool for facilitating discussion and a platform for mutual political education. Sometimes that will mean questions in one issue, and answers in the next. Principled disagreement. Call and response. Subscription for incarcerated people is 100% free. Just write them to tell them you want to keep receiving *In The Belly*, and we'll keep sending it in. Money-wise, we are completely sustained by outside supporters' donations. (In The Belly Journal / PO Box 67 / Ithaca, NY 14851). *For more information:* www.bellyzine.net/

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: As I was saying earlier, when I got arrested, it was five of us, and at least three people out of those five were testifying against me. I made the conscious decision that I was done with the whole street culture thing. I was like, "I'm done with crime. I'm done with all of that." When I decided to be done with that, I became more involved... Well, after I blew trial, I went upstate. I used to go to the yard a lot and work out. I stayed busy working out.

Eric King: What does that mean, upstate?

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: Upstate. Alright, so upstate is when you get arrested, you go to the county jail, and then you go back and forth to court until you either blow trial or cop out—plead guilty—and then they send you to the state facility to prison. You go from jail to prison to serve your sentence. While I was in jail fighting my case and all of that, I met a person who gave me a Machiavelli book, and he told me, "This is how you survive prison." I read the book, and I read other books. When I went upstate, I already had in my mind that I was done with anything that had to do with crimes. I'm done with it mainly because I had at least three people testifying against me and things like that. When I was upstate, then I was working out. When you go to the yard, there's always problems. Always there's going to be all type of problems in the yard. When I landed at Green Haven, I landed right after a huge riot happened between the whites and the African-Americans in prison. Shortly after me being there, then a big riot broke out between the Latin Kings and the Bloods. There's constantly things going on in the yard. A lot of gang wars and things like that. I said, "Well, you know what? I need to do less yard and more program." I signed up to take my GED. I joined a class. The teacher there wasn't teaching anything, so I cheated myself out of that class to go into a class that was really teaching. I took the GED, and from there I just started taking a lot of programs, programs that I felt would benefit me. At the time I was becoming a parent. I wanted to be a better parent to my child. I didn't want him to experience half of the things that I experienced while I was incarcerated. I took parenting courses, just a lot of courses that I felt I needed, a writing course, because my writing was very poor.

I also understood prison to be more mental than physical, right? I understood prison to be that you just have to pose a threat. You don't have to be a threat, but if people can read you, and they think that you could become a threat, they kind of leave you alone. But also prison is run

on a toxic masculinity level, and by that, I mean, prior to going to the state facility to prison, the same person that gave me the book, he said, "Listen, when you go upstate, you got to stay away from homosexuality. You have to stay away from gambling. Definitely mind your business. Don't join gangs. Just be yourself, and you should be good." I already had that in my mind. I'm reading the book and other books that deal more with psychology and just how to really manipulate other people and situations. I navigated my whole 27 years and two months without having to hurt anyone or anyone having to hurt me.

Basically, that's how I did my time. I did my time mainly programming, programming, programming, and hanging out with people that were likeminded. I mean, a lot of people knew me, and I would say, "What's up?" to people regardless of what gang or whatever they were in, but I would not hang out with them. I would stay to myself or with people that was likeminded. I also created a lot of art in between all of that. Art kept me real busy.

Eric King: Yeah. Alright. Briefly I'd like to ask both of you... In the feds, one of the worst situations we have is the racial element. You can only basically exist with people of your race or your car. I'd like to know—both of you, you're different races and everything—were you able to associate freely with people of different races, people of different religions? Were you able to live with them, eat with them, do fitness? Or was it as separated and divided as the feds sadly are? Farhan?

Farhan Ahmed: I think each facility, when it comes to New York state, depending on which facility you are, the rules might be a little bit different, or the circumstances, I should say, might be a little bit different. For example, the way the Green Haven facility is set up, even from an administration perspective, they are breaking it down in a similar way, like a racial way, right? You may have a court which specifically belongs to whites, other courts might belong to Spanish, and then you may have, oh this is a Brooklyn court. These are different areas. Those kind of things were very common in their facility. I think, as from my experience and my interactions, it did not really confine me in that kind of setting per se too much. One of the reasons were there were a lot of Muslims who were Black, you had a lot of Muslims who were Spanish, they had some Muslims who were white as well. That kind of became like a bridge between other courts or areas. Sometime they might be hanging out with the Muslims

Kwame Nkrumah, Ben Bella, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and others. Before his assassination, Malxolm converted to Sunni Islam, and after completing the Hajj to Mecca he became known as "el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz." Malcolm connected with the communist Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and advocated revolutionary Black internationalism, before he was assassinated on February 21, 1965.

The Young Lords — a revolutionary Puerto Rican political organization that fought for an independent Puerto Rico free of US colonialism. On Grito de Lares, September 23, 1968, Jose Cha Cha Jimenez reorganized a Puerto Rican street organization and formed the Young Lords as a national political and civil rights movement. The new community-wide movement then spread to nearly 30 cities. In addition, the Young Lords began operating free programs for the community. In addition to their support for Puerto Ricos' independence, all Latino nations, and oppressed nations of the world, the Young Lords also supported neighborhood empowerment. The radical movement of the Young Lords modeled themselves after the Black Panther Party, calling for a vanguard of revolutionary minority parties coming together that felt oppressed by a system that wasn't designed to be of assistance to minorities. The Young Lords' focus remains self-determination for Puerto Rico, other Latino and Third World countries, and for neighborhood-controlled development. Like other revolutionary groups of the 60's and 70's, the Young Lords were targeted by the FBI and faced severe state repression.

Mariame Kaba — an Black abolitionist activist, grassroots organizer, and educator. Mariame views prison abolition as the total dismantling of prison and policing while building up community services and opposes the reform of policing. Her work has created the framework for current abolitionist organizations including Black Youth Project 100, Black Lives Matter Chicago, and Assata's Daughters. She also helped found the organization Survived and Punished, an abolitionist organization that seeks to end sentencing for victims of intimate partner violence who defend themselves. Inspired by the resurgence of police and prison abolition during the 2020 George Floyd Uprisings, she published *We Do This 'Til We Free Us in 2021*, "a collection of talks, interviews, and past work that can serve as an initial primer on the PIC [prison-industrial complex] abolition and community building rooted in transformative justice."

Mary Wollstonecraft — a British feminist writer, philosopher, and advocate of women's rights. Mary is regarded as one of the founding feminist philosophers, and feminists often cite both her life and her works as important influences.

In The Belly — a journal by and for people who are held captive by the Prison-Industrial Complex. For people whose lives are impacted, determined, and overshadowed by punishment and incarceration daily: prisoners and their families, loved ones, friends, communities and comrades. Their project is to

People, Places, Events, & Organizations

Los Macheteros — the Ejército Popular Boricua ("Boricua Popular/People's Army"), also known as Los Macheteros ("The Machete Wielders"), is a clandestine militant and insurgent organization based in Puerto Rico which struggles for the independence of Puerto Rico from the United States. During their first decade of existence, they had an average of two actions per year, including the 1978 bombing of a small power station in San Juan, the 1979 retaliation attacks against the United States armed forces personnel, and the 1981 Muñiz Air National Guard Base attack. Boricua Popular Army was led primarily by former fugitive Filiberto Ojeda Ríos who was assassinated by the FBI in 2005. His killing was termed "an illegal killing" by the Government of Puerto Rico's Comisión de Derechos Civiles (Civil Rights Commission) after a seven-year investigation. The name Machetero was symbolically adopted from the Puerto Ricans guerrillas who assembled to defend Puerto Rico from the invading United States Army during the Spanish-American War in 1898.

colonialism — foreign domination of a country or people where the economic, political, and military structure is controlled and run by the occupying force. (*the Black Liberation Army Political Dictionary*)

imperialism — the exploitation, rape, and subsequent repression practiced by one nation over another for greed and profit. The extension of capitalism into the international arena. (*the Black Liberation Army Political Dictionary*)

Mike Davis — a revolutionary writer, political activist, urban theorist, and historian, famous for books like *Prisoners of the American Dream*, *City of Quartz*, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, *Planet of Slums*, *Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory*, and *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties*. At a young age, Mike read Marx and was radicalized by an older communist and Wobbly miner. Mike joined Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and then Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), radical organizations that struggled for Black Liberation and in support of third world national liberation struggles. During these times, Mike organized anti-apartheid demonstrations and protests against the Vietnam war and worked as a truck driver and butcher. Mike's work in Marxist geography and history, studies of international class composition and capitalist crises, and materially grounded studies of political economy make him one of the most insightful theorists of his time. Incidentally, Mike is said to have coined the term "prison abolition." Mike was also working with those who organized the 1992 gang truce during the Los Angeles Rodney King Uprisings.

Malcolm X — a Black revolutionary and Nation of Islam spokesman. During the Civil Rights Movement, Malxolm X advocated for freedom "by any means necessary." After leaving the Nation of Islam, Malcolm traveled to Africa and West Asia, meeting with revolutionary Pan-African socialist leaders such as

who are white, they might be hanging out with us, and they might be hanging out with their racial identity as well. That kind of opened a door for some of us, like, "Okay, it's okay to reach out and have conversation with somebody."

As for building rapport with everybody, I was very cautious that I was trying to keep my circle very small. One of the reason is that the smaller the circle you have, the less things you need to be worried and concerned about, just like Hector mentioned earlier that you may say "Hello, hi," to somebody, but you may not be hanging around with everybody. For me, when it comes to interaction with other racial identities, it was not that difficult, which also plays another role for me to open up doors and interact with everybody, because one of the things I was doing to keep myself busy was a hobby. For me it was crochet and knitting. I learned this while I was in prison, I was making kufis. I was making hats, scarves. That will kind of open doors for me to interact with other people. I had to be very—how do you say—formal, at the same time very cautious, not to be too friendly, but at the same time do open up enough to have a conversation with somebody.

It was kind of easier for me to navigate and observe. I think I was taking a lot of cues from other people, like what I should do, what are the expectation, so I would not stand out. For example, sometime it was easier, I noticed, that if I meet somebody new, he may misread me on the assumption that I'm not from this country, I may not know what's going on around me, so they may try to misjudge me, but I will interpret that it was not my responsibility to clarify and let them know I'm aware of what's going on. I will just use that in my favor to make sure I'm being neutral, to make sure I won't get myself in trouble.

Eric King: That makes a lot of sense. Did you ever have non-Muslim cellies?

Farhan Ahmed: Yes, I did. In Green Haven, we were forced to double bunk at least for six to eight months, but even before when I was at Five Point, the whole facility is structured as a double bunk, so I had cellies who were not Muslim. But I think the key role was how we were carrying ourselves. As long we were respecting each other and giving them a space to be themselves, there were less problems.

Eric King: Yeah, alright. Bori, you as well, were you able to intermingle racially? Did you ever have non-Puerto Rican cellies, or were you able to eat with different races? Things like that.

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: I had all type of cellies. I had all type of cellies with all types of religions. Way before Farhan got to New Haven, when I got to New Haven you was doing at least eight months double bunk, eight months to a year. I had all type of people in the cell. But prison is very divided. It's divided by race. It's divided by religion. It's divided by boroughs. You name it, there's division there. I'm Puerto Rican. When I went to Green Haven, the Puerto Ricans believe that I should hang out with them, but mostly all my friends in the street are Dominicans, and I kind of identify more with Dominicans than I did with Puerto Ricans.

There were times that I got into arguments with people who felt I need to be with them, because I just refused to let anyone tell me how I was going to do my bid. I'm thankful that it never got to a point, again, that I had to hurt anyone or anyone had to hurt me. But it is very divided, and it all depends on you, right?

Because people, they try you. People try you in many different ways, and the moment that you stand for yourself, they kind of fall back. But, yeah, it is divided. I have friends from all over. You know, my thing in prison was I don't want to know why you're in prison. I'm going to judge you by how you're carrying yourself. Your character is going to tell me whether I should mess with you or not. I never asked anyone what they was in prison for. Sometimes everybody know what they in there for, and, you know, obviously you stay away from those things, because at the same time you're not trying to draw any negative attention to yourself. You know, if you start hanging around with a child molester or something like that, that's a jacket that now you also going to have to wear. Nobody in prison really want to hang around with that. Nobody in prison want to hang out with somebody who has a reputation of being a rat or anything like that. For the most part, people understand their situation and they play their roles correctly, but those people that like to run groups, whether they're religious group or gangs, they do like to push the limit and bring you into their fold. Sometimes you just got to stop them.

Eric King: Were you in different custody levels in the state, because you were in for a long time? Did you work your way down, or were you always

Eric King: Hell yeah.

Josh Davidson: So good to see you outside, too.

Farhan Ahmed: Thank you.

Libertie Valance: Thanks all of y'all. This is a very generous conversation. I really appreciate you being here with us.

Eric King: Bye, friends.

Libertie Valance: See you again soon, Eric and Josh.

program together specifically with mental health in my mind. The objective of the program is to provide a safe space where participants can evaluate their mental state of mind and walk away with some more tools which can help them so that whenever they do face mental crisis they will be able to get themselves back on the line and seek professional help. That program just literally got completed. I'm just looking for opportunities to run it as a pilot program, see what else I can do to improve it. It's one thing when we have an idea on a piece of paper and another thing when we practice it.

The second part, to answer your question, as Hector mentioned earlier, I strongly believe about our well-being when we are learning something and trying to help others. That applies to a lot of us who are already doing the abolitionist work and who are planning on learning what can we do to help. One thing is to get to know them more, like how how we can learn what's going on with them so we can give them some more comfortable space where they can grow more? This program kind of addresses that kind of point. The way I'm looking at this mental health program is for the men who are already in prison or who are just stepping out. If we can help them understand where they are and how they can seek help, I think we are putting them a couple of steps ahead of somebody who does not know what to do when they are facing these crises.

Eric King: I like to end every show by encouraging people to please, please, please write prisoners. This program wouldn't be happening right now if Josh hadn't written me and then written to these two comrades. I always encourage people to write those in ADX who have nothing—24-hours locked down every single day of their lives. Please, please don't forget those people, and please don't prioritize political prisoners over prisoners. We all need to be free, and we all need love and support. For real, thank you both so much. It was a real real blessing to meet both of you, and thank you for sharing your stories. Josh, if you want to sign off, and then Libertie. Thank you, dude.

Josh Davidson: Thank you so much, Bori and Farhan, for joining us. It was such a pleasure.

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: Thanks everyone. I appreciate you guys. It was fun for me.

at the same custody level?

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: No, I worked myself down to a medium from a max A, and then I came home from a medium facility.

Eric King: Was the pressure and the antagonism—was that worse the higher up in custody you were? Or was it basically the same throughout? Were people trying to be like, "Hey, you should hang out with us or not hang out with them?"

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: It's kind of different, because I went in young, and when I went in young, people wanted you to be in their set. Green Haven has a big yard, and in the yard there's different weight courts, and every weight court for the most part is part of some type of group, but you have people that's not part of anything, and it's cool with everybody that they could basically work anywhere, because people just like them. They're cool. They not into anything negative, and people allow them to work with them. I was one of those people, like I could literally go anywhere I wanted to, and I would be received and accepted. But what gave me a headache was when I went to a medium. Now, people wasn't expecting me to be part of a gang, but because they saw me older, and they saw my number, and they was like, "Damn. This guy been down for a long time." But I felt that I was going back in time in my bid, because in the mediums you see a lot of gangs, where in the max there's gangs and all of that, but people are doing long sentences that for the most part is more controlled. The medium is a lot of young people that maybe have not been to a max facility, and they still young, they impulsive. Me, I felt like I needed to be more aware in the medium than I was in a max. I found the medium to be more dangerous than a max facility.

Eric King: That's interesting. Yeah, thank you. Right now, I'd like to ask you both about support you had or any connections you had with family or friends when you were first getting into prison, first couple years. Were you in touch with your family? Did you have friends that were able to support you? Did you do Books Through Bars? What was it like to have connections with the outside world when you were first locked up for the first several years? Farhan, if you'd like to start.

Farhan Ahmed: I had very little support at the beginning. Most of my family was back in Pakistan. I was more looking at it like, "What I can do

to support myself?" For example, when I started off my bid at Sing Sing, there was one older fellow from my country. He will always look out for me, try to bring some food for me. Whatever basic necessity I needed, he will try to help me out. I was constantly asking, I said, "Look, instead of trying to help me out, try to help me find some kind of skill which can help me to provide for myself." That was the opening door for me at the beginning, where I learned how to crochet, because he had introduced me to another older fellow who knew how to do crochet. That's what I learned from that person: how to provide for myself.

As I move forward for the next couple of years, I will ask around, like, "What's going on?" "How I can expand my support circle?" I came across some organization, if you write them they will send you some books, and I was kind of curious, like they will just give me some books if I will write them? The more I got to learn, I realized they were asking exactly what you are interested in, and they will send me books in those categories. That kind of thing made me to look at that place as an exploration, like, "What other opportunities are there for me?"

After about three years into my bid, I ended up in Green Haven, and I realized there were a lot of programs, volunteer programs, which were being run by different organizations. I began to sign up for those programs. Through those programs, I will meet more friends who were doing a similar kind of way to help themselves. This was my immediate support circle for the first few years. That transition changes around 2015 when I got into the Bard program, and I got into some other organizations who were willing to help me more, like trying to provide mentorship, but my transition up to that point at the beginning was very limited least to say. I believe the expansion took place after about eight years of my sentence.

Eric King: With your family—because you said a lot of your family was still in Pakistan—were you able to ever call them or get letters to them or was that cut off?

Farhan Ahmed: It was definitely, yeah, it was definitely challenging for me, because I would write to my family, and the letter will take at least four weeks or five weeks just to get the letter from here to over there. Then, it will take that much time just to get it back. Sometimes the letter I wrote I may not get a response to those questions, maybe a couple of

friends that I talk about so many things that they serve as therapist. I also think art has also helped me a lot.

Eric King: No doubt. I respect you both so much. For real. So this will be the last question—and thank you, Libertie, for letting us push that clock a little bit. You've both done really well. You've both gotten out, and it seems like you're both doing well, as far as projects or tangible success. If there's anything, any projects you're working on that you would like to boost or any words that you would have for people that do abolitionist work to help them understand how to support prisoners better or both, you can go ahead, Bori, we'll just start with you, and then we'll end with Farhan.

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: I mean projects that I'm working on—I'm trying right now, you know, I finished two art shows here at Yale. Tomorrow I'm going to Yonkers, New York to see some of my work at the Yonkers Riverfront Library. I'm having an art show at the University of New Haven in February and another art show at the Katonah Village Public Library. Those are just projects that I'm working.

When it comes to abolition work, I would say, right, because I so believe in Mariame Kaba's quote—you have to do it from a place that is safe for you, but also I believe in reform to abolish. I believe that we need to enhance the quality of life for the people who are incarcerated while we're educating them, and we're hopefully getting them to a place where they could advocate for themselves, right? So not to push our belief on somebody else, but let them figure things out—with guidance, of course, because if you don't introduce a book and you don't talk about it, then you won't be able to get their their perspective on it. That's about it, I think.

Eric King: Awesome. Awesome. Congratulations on your art success, that's really fucking badass. Also, I've never met a prisoner or ex-prisoner who didn't believe in "Let's make it better while we tear it down." This seems to be a white liberal idea that we can't reform while crushing it.
Farhan, my friend, what do you have going on? What projects are you working on, if any? And what would you say to people to help them better understand prisoners or to better help push prisoner support forward?

Farhan Ahmed: There are two things going on. One is immediate and the other one is in the near foreseeable future. I should say, I have put a

me to overcome some of the immediate stress.

Eric King: This whole program is that exact thing for me. You said you get to talk to someone like a mental health professional. Is that something that gets provided? Do you have to pay? Is it a weekly thing? What is your routine with that?

Farhan Ahmed: For me it is a weekly routine. I got introduced to this person through one of the organizations. I do not have Medicare or any kind of proper Medicare healthcare, so this is through a mentorship program that I'm getting this opportunity.

Eric King: Prisoner support can save people's lives.

Farhan Ahmed: Yeah.

Eric King: All right. Friend. Bori.

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: Yeah. I've always wondered how trauma was going to show up for me, because I've heard stories of people coming home and not wanting to be in crowded places. I don't have a problem with being in crowded places or crossing the streets or anything like that. But I realized how trauma showed up with for me when I came to Yale, and it took a while before I got my my Yale ID, and I wouldn't go inside certain buildings. I would not go inside the art gallery. I told somebody that, right? I told him, "Listen, I didn't go inside the art gallery because I didn't want to come in conflict with the security guard, right?" They told me, "Well, first of all, the only person that knows you formally incarcerated is you. Second of all, you don't need an ID to go into these places. If you go somewhere you're not supposed to go, most they going to tell you is like, 'What are you doing here?' or whatever. You're not going get sent back to prison." I reflected on that, and I remember that one of the things that I did in prison was to not venture off to places that I felt would get me in trouble. For example, if I live in a company, it's highly unlikely you're going to find me hanging out in another company, just so that I didn't have to deal with the officers or anything like that. I realized that I was doing the same thing out here. Once I became conscious of that, I said, "You know what? I just got to keep pushing the envelope, and I got to push myself into those places so that I could break that whole mentality." I don't go to a therapist, but I have so many mentors and

months later. Sometimes a letter will get lost in the mail. One time I literally just had an empty envelope. It was ripped. There was no letter inside, and the note said, "Oh, you could write back to the post office to see if they can find the content of the letter." As for the phone calls, I remember I was allowed to call once a month, and the call should not be longer than 20 minutes, and I have to pay for that. On average that 20 minutes was costing me about $15 to $20. I will definitely do that. I will try to save money, like when I will make different hats or scarves, and I will try to utilize money in a way that I will have some money in my account so I will be able to make those calls.

Eric King: Last question about that real quick. Were you able to have the phone calls and letters—did they have to be in English or were you able to do them in Urdu?

Farhan Ahmed: The mail, I was writing in my language Urdu. The letters I was getting from my family, they were in Urdu. Luckily, they did not give me a problem. They did not try to treat those letters as contraband because we cannot understand. I'm pretty sure they were making copies, because anytime mail is coming in a facility, they will open first. They will examine the mail for contraband and everything, and then the mail will come to you. I was certain that they were making copies of those letters and finding somebody who can translate for them, so they will know that I'm not communicating or trying to start something which they will be unaware of.

Eric King: Awesome, thank you. Bori, did you have support? Did you stay in touch with your community, your family? Did you have pen-pals? What was your support system like when you were when you were first coming in or later on when you were in?

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: It was a rollercoaster. When I first got in, the sister that I used to live with was very supportive of me, but then she passed away. I think like three years later she passed away. I was married for seven years, so that was a huge support, and then I got a divorce, and then I started building a relationship with another sister and her kids, and then I was also reaching out to different organizations outside. I built support like that. I've always had support, but it was a rollercoaster. Towards the end, I managed to build a lot of support, again reaching out to different organization. I think art opened the door for more support,

because I would donate artwork or send it to different competitions or whatever, and that would allow people to write to me, and I'll build a relationship with them based on whatever they said to me. I also had pen-pals. I had support.

Eric King: You said you were married for seven years. Was that someone you knew in the free world, or was that someone you met while inside doing a pen-pal thing?

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: No, I knew her before I got locked up. I knew her growing up. Her brother and I was good friends, so I knew her before I got locked up.

Eric King: Did the prison make it difficult? Me and my wife got married inside, we're still together thankfully, but they made it incredibly hard.

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: No, it wasn't difficult for me. I know a lot of people who got married in prison, and I don't think they made it difficult for them. But there was this one guy, he had a very famous case because he supposedly killed his family, so they made it difficult for him, because he had many people writing him from all over the world, so they made it difficult for him, but not for me and people that I knew.

Eric King: All right. Sweet, thank you. To start transitioning to political stuff, a lot of times something our movement will do, we will paint everyone with the same brush, like, "Oh, if you're a politicized prisoner, you must have these ideas. You must believe this. You must believe that." We don't always see people as individuals. We see them as part of a part of a collective, basically. I'd like to know with both of you, what did your politicization look like? What did it change in you? What were you reading? What did it motivate in you? What did it inspire in you? What did that look like? For me, it's radical anarchism, no hierarchical structures. I'd like to know what that was like for you inside as you became more and more aware and how it affected you? Farhan, if you could start, please.

Farhan Ahmed: I will start off that that kind of process began for me around, I would say, 2014, around that time. I had finished my GED in 2008 when I was at Five Point, and I had moved off from that facility, and I was in Green Haven, and I was reading different books here and there from the library, but I was not really engaging too much because I had family reunion. If you can only see your wife and kids every 45 days, you're going to really think twice about challenging a system that's going to take that away from you, and they know that.

Eric King: I think that's an amazing perspective for people that do abolitionist work to remember also is that by forcing our values or forcing people to act in a way that feels good for us it might really jeopardize how they live their entire lives. These bastards can take everything away. Thank you for bringing that up as well.

We only got a couple questions left. I've asked Libertie for a couple more minutes because I'm really enjoying this conversation. Something I would like to ask both of you—I asked this to almost every panel, also—and it's about the trauma, if any of you've experienced it, since being out, and how you dealt with that. Everyone's bid is different. Everyone experiences different things inside, whether it's brutality, whether it's just repression, boredom, whatever, but we all go through it together. So, I'd like to know, how's it going? How has your release been? Have you have you got help if you need it? Have you have you found comfort in things? Just how has it been since being free? Farhan we can start with you, friend.

Farhan Ahmed: The way I look at it, yeah, physically, I released about three months ago, but I believe my mental healing is yet to start. The way I'm looking at it, anybody who does more than a few months in any kind of place which traumatized them, they definitely need a long-term healing process. The one way I'm doing it is, it's a few different ways, one of them is having a conversation with a psychiatrist, trying to learn what are my triggers, and how I can live with them, not to express them. The way I look at this mental thing is—imagine a heart has been broken. You can put those pieces together, but the scars are still there. So, I cannot try to say, "Oh, I need to find a way how I can remove those scars." What I need to do is I need to find a way how I can learn to live with them. For example, what are my triggers? One of the triggers, even though it's been over three months, the moment I hear the sound of keys, it reminds me of a prison setting. I need to learn what my triggers are, and how I can live with them in a way where they will not further stress me, further mentally challenge me, rather than help me overcome them. Another example is that I would like to talk to my friends who can relate to who have gone through similar experiences. My family, my wife, I will talk to them, share what's going on with me, so by sharing this with them and hearing their feedback, it helps

something going on to keep education away. But I think the main reason is because it opens your mind, and it allows you to become better in every way that you can, whether it's arguing the way you view yourself, the way you view others. It just changed your whole life, and I don't think the system has an interest in changing your life in that manner.

Why I don't think there's enough political prisoners, my opinion is that, sadly, the way prison culture is, the different gangs, the different groups, they become oppressor, right? Like something in one of Mariame Kaba's book, she said that we have to do this work from a place that is safe for us. So, if you going to do the abolishing work, you have to do it from a place that you feel safe and comfortable, and in prison it's hard. In 1999 the whole New York state wanted to strike because they felt that if they don't go to program, they could get the laws changed, which, that doesn't work like that, right. The only way the law is going to change is if legislators change the law, but you have a large population of people incarcerated. A lot of them are gang members, so now they're saying anybody who leaves the cell, we're going to cut them, we're going to do this, we're going to do that, so now they're becoming the oppressor, and they're forcing other people to not do what they feel is correct. That's one reason.

Another thing is we have to understand is that people who are serving a long period of time, they find a certain stability in how to do their bids. A lot of them don't have support from families or friends, and so whether they work in an industry, the mess hall, or wheverer it is, the moment they get caught with any controversial information or whatever, they're going to lose those privileges, so they going to go back to starve. In 1999 with that riot that I was talking to you about, it was called the Y2K. Neighbors of mine the officers came, handcuffed them, and threw them down the stairs. Like you could hear them screaming as they were being handcuffed and thrown down the stairs. That is sending a message to everybody else there. And so that is why.

I'm sure there's many other different perspectives people may give you. I did it from a place that I felt was safe for me, and I could still get my education, and I could still reach out to people. I don't know if it's my character. I don't know what it is. I don't know if it was the universe. Again, I was lucky that I didn't allow for people to pressure me to do anything that I didn't want to do, but that's not the case with everybody, you know. I think those are the reasons, messing with people stability,

mentally told myself that, "Oh, English is not my language. I really can't learn anymore. This is it. Just keep doing small things to keep myself busy." However, around that time I was working in one of the programs where you facilitate classes, like teaching an anger management program or workshop...

Eric King: Like prisoners teaching?

Farhan Ahmed: Yeah, teaching other other men over there. While I was facilitating those classes, there was one volunteer who was coming in for Bard BPI, which is Bard Prison Initiative Program. She was a volunteer for them. At the same time, she had some clearance where she can interact with the facilitators as well. I had a lot of group discussions with that volunteer, and she really encouraged me to read more books. That was a first opening for me, at least trying to expand my horizon. At that moment I begin to reflect like, "Where am I? What are the circumstances? Let's look at a bigger picture," because I was constantly being observed and being experienced, like I'm from a different culture, I'm in a different country, and I'm in subculture of that country.

I begin to resonate more with colonialism and imperialism. That was the main structure which was really resonating with me, because I will constantly question myself, "If my country got independence about 70 years ago, why we are not on the same level with other countries who have been free or who were never being colonized by another force?" To answer those questions, to me the imperialism structure was really the focal point. I began to understand why that's happening, why the developed nations were colonizing, getting resources from them. To me, that structure was really giving me more of a political understanding of that. That played a role a couple of years later when I got into Bard College. The more I read, the more I begin to see similar structure being played within the United States, like the prison industrial complex, like how on the surface we may say the slavery has been abolished in this country, yet the prison setting is just the newer form of slavery. We may be saying that, "Yeah, other countries have gotten their political independence, but they are economically still being controlled by those foreign forces." That was the main structure or, you could say, template for me to begin to examine what was going on around me on a larger scale and a smaller scale.

Eric King: Are there any books that you can remember off the top of your head that had a really hard impact on you?

Farhan Ahmed: There were number of books I would say. I ended up reading a lot of books when I was writing my senior project. One of the books really resonates with me is by Mike Davis, is, I'm trying to remember the title of it. [*Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, 2000.] It's basically a history of India, like how India could never became a developed nation or why it cannot be a developed nation. In one sentence, the way Mike Davis in that book defines the history of India, he could say that for five centuries, around 1,500 to 2,000, there was no development economically. That was his way of saying that there was nothing happening. In reality everything was being extracted and taken to Europe, because they were being colonized by Europe—and when I'm saying India, at that time it was not just simply India, it was India and Pakistan, because they were one chunk of area which was being colonized by Europe, by the British at that time. The reason I was interested to learn more was because I was trying to understand why that was happening with Pakistan or India. What was the reason behind it? Obviously it was colonialism, which in other words is imperialism, which still exists, it just has morphed into something else. For example, instead of saying there is no more imperialism, all we got to do is just look at it, how we are being controlled with technology now or many different forms of new control, which is a representation of imperialism.

Eric King: Yeah, awesome. Thank you. Bori, if you could answer the same question about what did your—because you had already had it in the back-burner—what did your politicization look like? What were you reading? What were you feeling? Things of that nature.

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: Yeah, that's a very interesting question. I think that's interesting, right, because I started... When I got arrested, I was facing all these things like the death penalty, and I decided to just stop with with the criminal life. I also made a conscious effort to learn as much as I could about my mother and her upbringing to understand why she made the choices she made and not raising any of the boys, only the girls, and leaving us behind. Those questions led me to understanding patriarchy, its values and ideologies, and understanding that it's an offshoot from white supremacist ideas. As I'm trying to learn more about around you, who might be a better author or might be a sports figure. If you don't see anybody, you don't see yourself being on that level. I think if we don't have the reason, we don't have that many political people coming from prison, because they really didn't have that much experience being around somebody. I think what really helped me in those classes was that I was finding some of those examples through books. Sometime I will see some professors, they had that drive for that. They were working, and they were doing abolitionist work. They were doing community-level work. They were giving us examples of how to see words from other lenses, like Hector mentioned earlier, Mindi Fullilove's book *Roots Shock*. She has written a few books in the series after Roots. Basically, one of the things she shows through gentrification processes that build our environment and how our social and environmental facts are intertwining, how each can impact the other, and how we should be engaging with our immediate surroundings. Those were the things which were giving me a different lens. They were showing me how other professors are doing a similar kind of abolition work for many different lenses. So, seeing that, it gave me a whole different spectrum. I could be doing that work from this lens or from that lens, and those were the example which helped me to expand my understanding or pursue more of that political perspective.

Eric King: Awesome. For those watching, this is why they ban books in prison, because that access creates power, and they don't want you to have that. Bori, if you could answer the same questions, friend, about why you think we don't see more politicized prisoners, and the role having access to education or classes might have played in your finding it.

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: I'm going to start from the education part first. Like you just said, education frees mind, it opens minds. At least for me, it allowed me to view myself in places that prior to it I didn't see myself, like being in Bard College, being among peers that I feel were way smarter than me, were better critical thinkers than myself, and seeing how they talked about the same material that I was reading. It allowed, it encouraged me, inspired me, but it also allowed me to see myself as a scholar. It allowed me to see myself differently than without an education, and the system knows that. The system knows that. Also, you have officers that have very limited education, and they don't... you know, they always say, "Well, why should these people have education which my children have to pay for?" and so on and so forth. There's always

and then we were in Fishkill together, as well. When we were at Fishkill, right after when Hector submitted some of his work for the Certain Days Calendar, and it came back with that note, he built his relationship with Josh. A couple of years later, Hector introduced me to Josh, and I begin to communicate, and then Josh asked me a similar thing, like, "Look, we are about to do another process of selecting essays for the *Certain Days* calendar, would you like to submit something?" In 2022 I did submit an essay, which got selected for, I believe, the 2024 calendar. This is so not clear for me because of that 18 months being stuck in a detention center. But that was how I met Josh, and I'm great to have that opportunity, because he really helped me expand more on that understanding, like, what is this political understanding of fighting when it comes to the prison industrial complex? Because it's one thing that we can just fight it only on a social level, but it expands our understanding when we see how social and political entities are so intertwined that you cannot even separate them, yet they are shaping how we are interacting with each in each setting. I believe more. I'm reading in different books about individual fights or individual ways to fight, which is really helping me to combine each of them together and acknowledge that we have to change our environment in order to change our self as well. We cannot simply just change our mindset and move forward.

Eric King: Oh, yeah. For anyone watching—I say this almost every time we do this—but the more Josh Davidson's we have, the quicker we can tear down the system. If we have people really put tangible work and tangible support and tangible love and real caring, that's how we win. So, the more Josh's the better. I would like now to talk about—both of you participated in college programs, it seems. Lots of programs, really. I would like to ask why, firstly, do you think there's not more politicized prisoners. We all experience this repression. Why do not more people come to that table of seeing the systematic abuse and wanting to fight it? And then, two, what role did you think having access to those classes played in your life to push you in that direction? Farhan, you go ahead and start.

Farhan Ahmed: I think why we do not have enough political prisoners, I would say, is because a lot of us, we lack examples, we lack role models, we were not around in those kind of settings where see what's going on and how we can fight. For me, at least growing up in Pakistan, I was so far away from the main narrative of what's going on. You don't see a star

my mother—and I'm in Bard college and I'm learning all these terms and ideas that I didn't know about—I'm also becoming, you could say, radicalized to a certain extent, because now the information that I'm getting is helping me connect the dots in my personal life, right? So, books. Like, I read books of Malcolm X. I read books by Mariame Kaba. I read books by the Young Lords. But those books did not impact me as much as Plato did. They didn't impact me as much as Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* Yeah, those books—and there's many more—but those books really changed me as a person, and it changed my view, because it allowed me... For example, Mary Wollstonecraft, right, one of the things that stood out with me was that she was saying, man, let's not compete with our physical, let's compete with our brain, right, like educate woman, and then let's compete at that level. That resonated with me because of how difficult my mother had it growing up in Puerto Rico with a father that was very patriarchal who, I feel, mistreated her in so many ways.

Plato, you know, just building this perfect city and the questions that came about in that book, and the allegory of the cave, and all these things. It helped me—at least the allegory of the cave—helped me understand how our communities are built, and as long as you keep putting the same thing in front of us, whether it's through social media, rap videos, all these things, we going to kind of like buy into that narrative and keep repeating it. Being in a classroom, then, I understood what structural racism was, and how all of that is designed for us to just stay at a certain level, not progress. My radicalization—and is also what influenced my art—these are the books... There's another book, Farhan I think you know it, *Root Shock* [*How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, And What We Can Do About It*, 2004]. How that book impacted me was—because by the time I went to a medium I had 23 years in a max facility which is very industrial—there's no nature. There's no nothing there. Now I'm being taken away from a max facility, I'm placed in a medium facility where I could look outside. There's cats, there's dogs, there's deers, there's trees, there's mountains, there's the highways. But I felt out of place, right? I felt that... I had a headache for two weeks.

I felt like I wanted to go back to a max, and I couldn't understand it, so I related that message to one of my professors, and he told me to read that book, and what that book did for me was it explained how communities in poor neighborhoods, people, even though they are living in poor

neighborhoods and they don't want to live in those poor neighborhood, they built communities in those poor neighborhood, and so when big business come in and gentrify the neighborhood and disperse them all over, it messed them up. It messed up the community they have. It messed them up in many different ways. That's how I feel. Although I hated prison, and I hated Green Haven—I knew it. I was there for over two decades. I knew the system, then I was placed at a different system. These are the books that like I feel really impact me. Not so much Malcolm X. Not so much the Young Lords and things like that, because I grew up hearing about them, but since I was more on a personal journey to understand why my mother made the choices she made, and why I was so full of violence, the books that I mentioned was the ones that really impacted me, and it influenced a lot of my artwork with my eco-feminism work and even prison work.

Eric King: I'm going to stay with you for a second and then I'll want Farhan to answer the same question, because one of the things you brought up, I actually brought up to Josh earlier, because I thought it'd be incredibly fascinating to see. Toxic masculinity in prison is fucking wild. It is the worst of the worst, basically. Every bad instinct that men have gets magnified when we're inside prison and just becomes worse in my mind. That was really hard for me. That was really hard for me to see the way people treated women. We basically treated women like they were the prisoners and we were the staff, basically. You brought that up as having a big impact on you, finding out about patriarchy and stuff like that. Can you talk to me about what shedding toxic masculinity meant to you inside? And how it affected how you treat others inside and outside of prison?

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: Well, to me it doesn't matter the name that you give it. You could give it toxic masculinity. You could give it street culture. You could give it machismo, whatever. It's all the same thing. It's all come from the same branch, and it all starting from this patriarchal values. Toxic masculinity shows up differently in so many different ways for people. Prison has this mentality with the prison culture that the strong survive. By that, sometimes it means that the quicker you are to cut somebody, stab somebody, or do something, then people would stay away from you, because you're dangerous, and you're exercising your manhood or whatever. That's one extreme, right? A different way that toxic masculinity shows up is—let's say I'm not the violent type. I'm more

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: ...and again it was prisoners just sending in writings and things like that, and she gave me an article saying you should send your artwork to the Certain Days Calendar that Josh is part of, and so I sent a little character over there, and sadly my little character didn't make it to the calendar, but it came back with a lovely note from Danielle, and then we just started corresponding, and before you know it we became great friends, but it started like that. Again, art opened a lot of doors. Me sending a piece of artwork that didn't end up in the calendar but it ended up on their wall and created a great friendship.

Eric King: Hell yeah! Farhan, did you ever meet any political prisoners or any people that pushed you along that path? And then, also, how did you meet Josh? Two-part question.

Farhan Ahmed: I believe when I was at Green Heaven there was one elder gentleman. He was Muslim, and everybody's general consensus was he was part of the Black Panther Party. Every time... Like even when he got drafted out, the way they drafted him out—usually, as you know, when somebody's getting drafted out, you know, the day before, you pack up your property, and then you leave. But they will simply remove him from the cell, and take him to the next facility, and his property will follow him. I believe he was part of the Black Panther Party. Him and me, we will have conversations. The conversations was in that kind of direction, but he wasn't really explicit to state that this is who I am, and this is what you should be doing, how you can understand what the government is doing, and how you should be responding. I think what really helped me when I will interact with him or other elder men who were close to him, is that for me, since I was reading all this material from different perspectives, hearing from him personally it was a more eye-opening or a reinforcement of that same narrative that was going on. For example, I read this book one time, *A Full Spectrum Resistance*, it's two volumes by Aric McBay, and I believe anybody who's doing advocate work or political work, he or she should be reading that book. My interaction with him was really a reinforcement of how these oppressions still exist in many different cultures, many different settings, and how we should be educating ourselves to be a better citizens where we can make better choices.

To answer your second question, how I met Josh. Hector and I, our time overlapped when we were in prison. We were in Green Heaven together,

important to remember that this is ingrained in people, ingrained in a lot of cultures, and we can help. We can help people. We don't have to just abandon everyone if they say the wrong thing or make a mistake. We can help build people up. Speaking of building people up—and this will be a brief one—but did either of you run into—like New York state is just fucking filled with political prisoners, or it has been over the last 20 to 30 years—so did either of you ever run into some of those people? If so, did you have conversations? Did it help push you along? Did it have no impact? Either of you can start.

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: When I went up Upstate, I had a friend who, he was deeply into the law, and he told me that he was going to put me down into some law classes so that I learned the prison handbook. I learned how to write. Because the officer write misbehavior report, he's like, "Yo, you have to learn how to defend yourself from those things, and also how to properly write an officer up," and stuff like that. In that sense, you know, I was around people in the beginning that they helped me, they gave me the tools I needed to survive that system. There are a lot of political prisoners, I'm sure it's not only New York state. I'm sure they're everywhere. But I think it depends how much a person want to put themselves out there, because with being around political prisoners come a lot a lot of sacrifices. For example, if I'm going on my family reunion visit with my wife, right, and I'm hanging out with you, and all the officers hate you because you're writing them up for every little thing, then now I become a target as well, and so now they're going to go in my cell, they're going to put a shank, they're going to do all type of things to set me up so that I don't have that privilege. It's like learning how to fight the system in a way that you minimize how it's going to impact you. But I've met a lot of people I'm still in contact with, people that, just their way of thinking and challenging the system is, I think, it's never going to stop, because it's just embedded in them. I get the sense that they always been like this, just in prison, they have time to sharpen up, because now they get to read and build among themselves.

Eric King: How did you meet Josh?

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: Oh, I met Josh, because the same professor that introduced me to—there was a zine called *In The Belly*...

Eric King: *In The Belly*'s sick!

smart, but I have a job that pays me more than you, and you may have the lowest job, and now I'm flexing. I think I'm better than you, because I have this job that's giving me more money. It shows up different. Those are two different sides of the spectrum.

I use toxic masculinity to benefit me, because I knew in prison that all you have to do is pose a threat. That's all you have to do. But it's not the only thing you have to do, because it also depends how you play your cards. I was never in a gang. Many people try to draw me to their gangs, but I never did that. I was always with maybe one or two people, not more than that. But I learned that if I don't talk too much, if I don't really reveal too much of myself to you, you don't know me. You can't read me right. The moment that I feel you say something out of line, I check you. I check you in a hard way. You going to be like, "Oh, hold up. He may be willing to do this and that." That keeps the balance. Once I understood that, I said, "Okay, prison is more mental than it is physical," and that's how I use that. I use the threat, the possibility of becoming dangerous to benefit me. It's like juggling balls, because you can't be a tough guy in prison. Nobody is super tough in prison, because the toughest person in prison could get hurt, so it's not about being tough. It's about being smart and learning how to think and work yourself in and out of situations.

That's how it showed up for me, but I've seen it a lot where other people... Mainly in religion. This is seen in a lot of religion, mainly in Muslim religion. They feel that they could dictate to you who you could talk to and all these things. I've seen all of that, but thanks to the universe or whatever, I never really found myself in a dangerous position. I don't know. Sometimes, to be honest with you, I ask myself, I don't know how I survived 27 years without really coming out of character or having to hurt anyone or anyone hurting me. Believe me, I saw myself in many different complicated situations, but for whatever reason it never hurt me. I've been in difficult situations with a correctional officer, sometimes with prisoners who try to impose their ways on me, but for whatever reason it just worked out for me.

Eric King: I'm glad it did. Thank you. Farhan, I'm not going to pretend to know your family background or anything, but when you came to prison, it was a culture shock, as you said. You're learning not just American culture but now prison culture. Did you find that there was a version of masculinity within prison that was violent, was gross, was not within your

character, or did that develop over time to where maybe you started seeing like, "Wow, this isn't how I want to be as a man" throughout your bit, or maybe never, I don't want to presume for you either.

Farhan Ahmed: Thank you. Well, I think, as Hector mentioned earlier, this kind of masculinity exists across the board. I think in a lot of cultures, if we look back, we can see that thread running through, and including religious settings as well, like Hector mentioned earlier. When I look back at my adolescent years when I was in Pakistan, I'm the youngest one in my family. I'm the youngest sibling. Everybody, all my siblings, they have gone to school, they got the GED, and even pursued a little bit more education, including my sisters. As I was growing, I will see that kind of masculinity thing playing a role, but I think the more educated we were, it was giving us room how not to become that person who's really enforcing their will on others. That kind of example stayed with me, and in a way I feel have the opportunity to be in a position where I can see my own culture and I can see another culture.

What I started to do as I was being exposed to different cultures, I will take the good in each, and I will try to see which values in each culture may not be good and shouldn't apply on my life. When I will observe some men, the way they are treating women, I will cringe to myself, like "Why would you do that?" That was my understanding of that. If I will observe some men, they are trying to either tell women what to do and how to do, or make them feel like they are above them, I will tell myself, "I don't want to be that person," and I will try to do that through my actions. One of the examples is that I remember about a few years ago, one of my nieces—I'm close to her, so I will talk to her over the phone—and I know sometime we hear that arranged marriages are very common in a lot of cultures, which is still common to some extent in Pakistani culture, as well as in Muslim culture, however when it comes to my household or my with my sisters, this notion is not as strong as some may have observed or heard from in other cultures—my niece was saying, "There is an opportunity where my family is introducing me to one gentleman, and they think I should get married in their house." I asked her, I said, "If you don't feel comfortable, do you want me to talk to your parents? Or do you want to talk to them by themselves? Let me know. I'm here to support you. If you feel like it's not comfortable, I will support you with that." I'm using this example to say that she ended up talking to her parents, and they understood her perspective, and she did not get married over there.

But I was very careful and observant also that the understanding I have of two different cultures, I cannot assume that somebody who's living in another culture will just simply embrace it. I might be more comfortable, where if I can see that somebody is talking down to somebody, I could intervene and tell them, "This is not the right thing to do," because I have been exposed to two different cultures. I might be supporting my niece, but she's living in the culture where everybody might challenge her, they might look down at her, or they may say, "Oh, you are defying our norms," because she's only in that culture. So, I have to keep that kind of thing in my mind, too, and which I believe is very important when we are trying to help or encourage somebody to change, we want to see what is the context as well. If somebody still living in the same social setting, and we are anticipating them to go against those norms without giving them some kind of support, I think we are setting them on a wrong path. We have to give them the support as well, not just simply tell them, "Oh, this is wrong. Don't do it." Without support, I think, the next person will not succeed, and that could apply with toxic masculinity. It could apply on many different levels.

Hector "Bori" Rodriguez: Can I add something to that? I think it's also important to single out that female officers also encourage toxic masculinity, because the thing is that, sadly, a lot of us, we're brought up in thinking that being a man and being dominant is how things should be. So there are times when you have female officers that don't respect you if you're expressing yourself. Or if you're not like that macho man, they don't respect you, they disrespect you, and they put you in very complicated situations. That's why it's so sad that the carceral state is... Like, I went back and forth with one of my mentors about this. I told her that in prison people respect violence. She said, "No, people don't respect violence. People fear violence." It took a while before I could really agree with her, because of what I saw in prison. But the whole patriarchal ideology is white supremacist. You don't have to be white to practice that belief. It's just so embedded in our culture and in us, and it show up so differently that we practice it and think it's normal. It takes sometimes education, takes other people that are more aware than us to help us see how it's showing up in our behavior and in our characters and so on and so forth.

Eric King: Yeah, I agree 100%. I appreciate both of you answering that for real. For those watching, it's important to remember support. It's